

# Operation Unified Assistance: Tsunami Transitions

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**O**n 26 December 2004, a massive tsunami struck Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Sumatra, destroying towns, villages, ports, bridges, and roadways and killing over 200,000 people. The disaster left hundreds of thousands of people without adequate food and shelter. Based on multinational requests for assistance, U.S. President George W. Bush directed U.S. Army Pacific Command (PACOM) to launch Operation Unified Assistance to provide disaster relief via Combined Support Force (CSF) 536.

Using its unique ability to move humanitarian supplies rapidly via strategic and tactical lift, the CSF assembled and coordinated combined service assets to assess requirements and deliver aid quickly where

*Other Than War*, states that the U.S. military conducts three types of humanitarian assistance operations: those the United Nations coordinates, those the United States operates unilaterally, and those it does in concert with multinational forces.<sup>1</sup> Operation Unified Assistance was conducted with multinational forces under a flexible command and control (C2) arrangement. The CSF experience shows transition planning is a complex procedure, but existing joint doctrine provides a sufficient framework to begin the process.

## Working with Others

The CSF learning curve for working with non-U.S. military personnel was nearly vertical. U.S. plan-

ners function well in the familiar environment of military planning, but each high availability disaster recovery (HADR) environment is unique, and staffs must adapt to succeed. Developing an effective transition plan required the participation of representatives from the humanitarian relief community (HRC) and partner nations. Directing tasks to these people is one thing; actively engaging their participation with courteous, insightful dialog that is neither



Sri Lankan relief workers unload bags of vegetables from an HH-60 "Pavehawk" helicopter belonging to the 33d Rescue Squadron, Kadena Air Base, Japan, 2005.

it was needed. Combined support groups (CSGs) performed the roles of civil-military operations centers (CMOCs) for each of the affected countries, enhancing tactical delivery of CSF aid. Working closely with host-nation authorities, American embassies, and CSF headquarters, the CSGs ensured aid met the specific needs of each country.

Joint Publication (JP) 3-07, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Military Operations*

condescending nor aggressive is another. Nothing will cause a breakdown in communications with civilian or partner-nation representatives faster than flat-handed, finger-pointing gestures or condescending A-B-C questions from staff officers. The better that aid workers and foreign liaison officers (LNOs) are treated the more the plans team will learn and the better the plan will be. Plus, representatives will feel some ownership of the

plan and will actively help execute it. In the HADR environment, relief organizations and partner nations definitely get a vote. They are at meetings to help, not hinder, the process. They should be treated as equal members of the relief team.

The CSF coordinated civil-military operations in a combined coordination center (CCC) formed by combining PACOM's multinational planning and augmentation team, partner-nation LNOs, and HRC planners. While partner nations were free to conduct independent operations, they quickly saw the benefit of coordinating their relief with the CCC. In accord with JP 3-07.6, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Foreign Humanitarian Assistance*, the CCC covered operational-level CMOC doctrinal requirements and the CSFs served as tactical CMOCs.<sup>3</sup> CCC planners assigned military assets to coordinate and execute HRC tasks at the operational level.

### Transition Planning

Military-to-civilian transition planning was challenging, and determining when military assistance was sufficient and complete was particularly difficult. Joint Publication 3-57, *Doctrine for Joint Civil Affairs*, states that such a transition should occur when "the mission has been accomplished" or when the president and secretary of defense so direct.<sup>4</sup> But defining "mission accomplished" was a tough nut to crack. The CSF had to understand that relief agencies and, especially, partner-nations did not adhere to the C2-type structure the military worked under and that CSF success would be achieved through member cooperation and coordination.

Because of the unfamiliar operating environment, deciding when to transition relief efforts from military to civilian forces initially boggled military planners' minds. Joint Publication 3-07.6 explains the issue of coordinating relationships clearly, but the concepts of transition did not become clear until HRC LNOs attended the planning sessions.<sup>5</sup> Because their perspective differs from the military's, and because the HRC continues to provide assistance after the military departs, the LNOs' participation in the planning process was particularly valuable. So too was the involvement of civil affairs representatives and HRC participants from the U.N. and the U.S. Department of State's (DOS's) Office of Disaster Assistance (OFDA). The U.N. representatives, especially, provided a good transition methodology. That we were developing a transition plan early in the operations impressed HRC representatives. Previous experience had led them to believe the military would

wait until the last minute. Planning for transition involved two steps: mission analysis and course of action (COA) development.

**Mission analysis.** The transition was actually a continuous operation, moving from military assistance to international response efforts to a final long-term host-nation effort. The U.N. representative emphasized that the transition would not move from a well-defined military structure to a well-defined, centrally controlled civilian structure, but more likely flow outward from the military structure to numerous HRC organizations and host-nation governments. The transition would be quite different from the usual battle handover familiar to military planners and not at all like the detailed process JP 3-07.6 describes.<sup>6</sup> The U.N. planner recommended transferring stored supplies to other organizations for distribution (to prevent waste) and identifying incomplete tasks to be handed over on transition.

Two transitions occurred, one from military to international assets and the other from international to national assets. The handovers occurred not at specific times, but in windows or periods of transition during which relief providers performed simultaneous, overlapping missions in their areas of operation.

Several factors greatly affected CSF planning. One, repeatedly emphasized, was that the nations



A young tsunami victim awaits evacuation via U.S. Air Force C-130, Banda Aceh, January 2005.



participating in relief efforts formed a combined force of willing participants who could conduct independent operations or leave the combined effort if they chose to. Host-nation approval of the transition plan was also critical, lest the CSF depart before the emergency relief mission was complete. And finally, the CSF's mission was limited to conducting essential life-sustaining operations, not long-term reconstruction projects.

The next step was to identify specified and implied tasks. In developing implied tasks, CSF planners were careful to differentiate between operational and tactical tasks: the former belonged to the CSF, the latter to the CSGs operating in each nation. Planners understood that the three nations would recover from the disaster at different rates. One nation had a much better infrastructure before the disaster and was able to recover faster than the other two, which meant transition timelines would be different for all three. The CSF therefore held off dictating specific steps to take.

Planners also designated the CSF center of gravity as the capability to coordinate and synchronize efforts in collaboration with relief agencies and partner nations. Another planning concern involved threats to the mission. Staff identified the possibility of mission creep (into long-term reconstruction or assistance) and the potential for negative local, regional, or global public perception as the most likely dangers. Indonesia being a mostly Muslim nation, negative perception was thought to be more likely there the longer the U.S. military remained. Overall, the CSF formulated a cogent plan to do a complex mission that, when command-approved, required it to execute overlapping efforts in three countries simultaneously while slowly ceding operations to civilian control.

**COA development.** While mission analysis went fairly smoothly, the CSF had a difficult time adhering to joint doctrine for formulating COAs. COA development for a transition that was somewhat ambiguous led planners to develop just one COA—a rough list of tasks for the CSGs and other subordinate elements to complete or pass on to other agencies as the CSF slowly shrank and eventually redeployed. However, the CSF commander's guidance from the mission-analysis brief veered away from specific requirements, referring to the transition as Jell-O®. Even so, the CSF assigned the transition three phases: assessment, transition, and disengagement. Joint Publication 3-07.6 recommends assessment, observation, and orientation for transfer, integration of functional support, and handover of responsibilities.<sup>7</sup> Ultimately, DOS, the regional



**Aerial view of temporary housing set up for tsunami victims in Banda Aceh, 2005.**

combatant command, or the host nations would tell the CSF when to redeploy.

Defining the C2 structure for the transition depended on the host nation. Responsibility for operations in Thailand could be passed to the joint U.S. military advisory group there, allowing the CSF to disengage from the country, but not in Sri Lanka or Indonesia. Continued operations in those countries came under the purview of their defense attachés.

Identifying the desired effects for the transition and then developing a process to measure the CSF's progress were critical steps in determining when the transition could begin. Joint Publication 3-07.6 recommends using measures of effectiveness (MOEs), but MOEs cannot be determined until a desired-effects list is formulated.<sup>8</sup> Combined Support Force 536 commanders did not develop an effects list because they did not want to commit the force to effects that might eventually prove to be unrealistic or too costly. Even determining the minimum amount of water, food, or shelter to provide was difficult to ascertain. The CSF bogged down in discussion because there were too many different sets of standards that could be applied.

Determining the criteria that a transition would require proved particularly difficult. HRC representatives recommended using the International Red Cross's Sphere Standards of Habitation Environments as desired outcomes for each country. Based on the belief that populations affected by disaster have the right to live with dignity, these standards address water supply, hygiene, sanitation, food, shelter, and health issues.<sup>9</sup> However, many of the Red Cross's standards were not being met before the disaster; therefore, CSF leaders did not feel required to undertake long-term infrastructure reconstruction.

Another criterion for transition recommended tracking a minimal number of requests for assistance



**Navy Airmen from a helicopter antisubmarine squadron help an Indonesian woman to a helicopter to be transported to a medical facility, 2005.**

(RFAs), since a declining number would seem to indicate less need for military assistance. The CSF commander chose the number of RFAs, not the Sphere Standards, to be his MOE. In setting forth principles to guide the transition, he directed that the military footprint would slowly shrink when RFAs for military assistance decreased or were passed to aid agencies. The RFA versus Sphere Standards debate offers an important lesson learned: Military staffs must avoid building exhaustive task lists for humanitarian relief that will lead their organizations down the dark road to mission creep and quagmire. The end of military operations does not mean the end of relief operations; it only means that civilians are in control.

Based on its commander's guidance, CSF 536 would terminate operations supporting the relief effort when—

- The host nation asked it to.
- OFDA told the CSF it could manage relief operations without military assistance.
- Higher headquarters ordered the CSF to do so.

No mention was made of postdisaster living conditions in the three nations. The operation would move from a push effort to a pull effort and then to a pull-from-others effort; it would require analysis of what the CSF was doing, what it could stop doing, and the costs of each. Of course, a decision by the host nation, OFDA, or the U.S. Department of Defense to cease military operations was the final criterion.

### A Unique Challenge

As it unfurled, the military operation in support of Operation Unified Assistance provided a unique challenge to CSF 536 and other PACOM units. In particular, the CSF had to understand the special relationships between it and its partners in order to synchronize and maximize aid efforts. It did, and was able to leverage into its transition plan the wealth of knowledge and experience HRC aid workers and partner nations brought to the operation. In the end, gaining civilian and partner-nation perspectives on the transition plan was key to the CSF's successful transition and redeployment. **MR**

### NOTES

1. Joint Publication (JP) 3-07, *Joint Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Military Operations Other Than War* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], 16 June 1995), III-5.

2. I refer to other nations that provided military support in Operation Unified Assistance as partner nations.

3. JP 3-07.6, *Joint Tactics, Techniques and Procedures for Foreign Humanitarian Assistance* (Washington, DC: GPO, 15 August 2001), III-2.

4. JP 3-57, *Doctrine for Joint Civil Affairs* (Washington, DC: GPO, 21 June 1995), 3-57.

5. JP 3-07.6, IV-8.

6. *Ibid.*, IV-22, para. 23a.

7. JP 3-07.6, IV-23.

8. *Ibid.*, IV-24.

9. Sphere Project, *The Sphere Project: Humanitarian Charter and Minimum Standards in Disaster Response* (Oxford, UK: Oxfam Publishing, 2004).

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